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LAST MAN, LAST ROUND

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Chapter 1. To The Death

BUT OUR STORY GOES BACKWARDS IN TIME – FIRST, TO THE SUMMER OF 1937. A PARTY OF BRITISH TOURISTS HAD STOPPED CLOSE TO THE SHATTERED RUINS OF A FRENCH CHATEAU. TWO OF THE MEN HAD FOUND A SMALL METAL PLAQUE PINNED TO WHAT REMAINED OF A WALL.

AS THE SIGHTSEERS BEGAN TO MOVE AWAY, A TALL, GREY-HAIRED MAN IN A SHABBY TRENCH COAT MOVED NEARER TO THE PLAQUE.

HANS SPIEGEL WAS INDEED THE ONLY MAN WHO KNEW AND REMEMBERED WHAT HAD HAPPENED TO THOSE MEN HONOURED ON THE PLAQUE. HE HAD BEEN THERE.
I SALUTE YOU AND YOUR MEN, SERGEANT THOMSON. YOU WERE ALL BRAVE MEN. WE KILLED YOU BECAUSE IT WAS OUR DUTY~ BUT I WILL NEVER FORGET YOU.

SPIEGEL WALKED SLOWLY BACK TO HIS CAR. HIS ANNUAL PILGRIMAGE TO THE CHATEAU WAS OVER.
THOSE BLESSED TOURISTS - TRAMPLING ALL OVER MY GRASS, M'SIEUR. THAT PLACE OUGHT TO BE PULLED DOWN. IT'S ONLY A RUIN, ANYWAY. SO TEN MEN DIED THERE. IT WAS ALL SO LONG AGO. WHO WANTS TO BE REMINDED NOW?
PERHAPS YOU ARE RIGHT, M'SIEUR~ AND YET...

THE MISTS OF TIME ROLLED BACK AGAIN. IT WAS DECEMBER, 1916. OVER THE RAVAGED FIELDS OF FLANDERS, TWO GREAT ARMIES HAD FOUGHT EACH OTHER TO A STANDSTILL. IN STAFF H.Q., BEHIND THE GERMAN LINES...
GENTLEMEN. THIS IS THEIR WEAKEST SECTOR. CONCENTRATE OUR ARTILLERY AND RESERVES ON THIS POINT. THIS TIME, WE'RE GOING THROUGH!
JAWOHL, HERR GENERAL.

AND A UNIT OF THE 5th. BEAUFORT REGIMENT WAS TRUDGING THROUGH THE MUD TOWARDS THE BRITISH FORWARD LINES.
TWO DAYS TO BLOOMIN' CHRISTMAS! HEY, SARGE, CAN WE HANG UP OUR STOCKINGS?
YES, CHARLIE, WHEN WE REACH THE FRONT LINES. JERRY'S GOING TO FILL THEM UP FOR US!

THE GERMAN ATTACK WAS ABOUT TO BURST UPON THE BRITISH LINE LIKE A HURRICANE.
OUR RECONNAISSANCE THINK THE BRITISH SECTOR IS DUE TO BE RELIEVED. THEY MUST NOT GET THROUGH. POUND THEIR SUPPORT LINES. SMASH THEM, INTO THE GROUND!

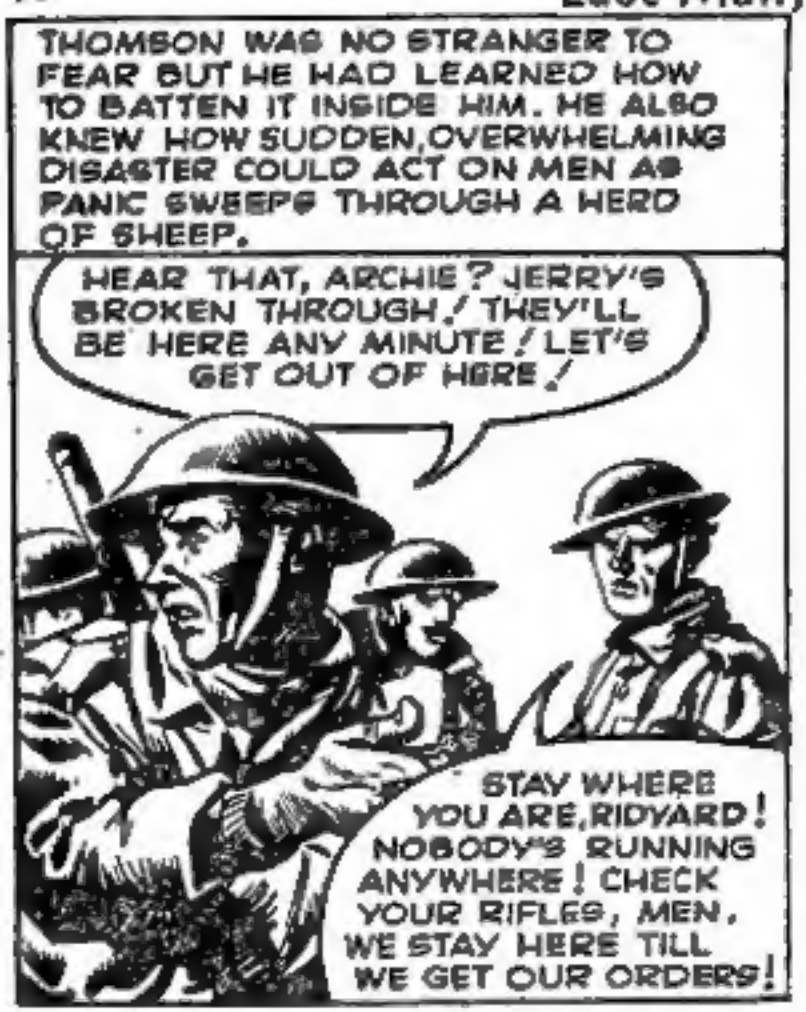
THE MEN OF THE 5th BEAUFORTS HAD REACHED THE OUTSKIRTS OF L'EGLISE WHEN THE GERMAN BARRAGE BROKE OVER THEM IN A HOLOCAUST OF TERROR AND DEATH.

SERGEANT THOMSON HERDED HIS MEN TO COVER AND WAITED PHILOSOPHICALLY. HE HAD MET DEATH SO OFTEN IT WAS NO STRANGER TO HIM.
WHAT'S UP WITH JERRY, SARGE? SOMEBODY OUGHTER TELL HIM IT'S CHRISTMAS~ THE SEASON OF GOODWILL TO ALL MEN!
SHUT UP AND GET YOUR HEAD DOWN. IT'LL SOON BE OVER.

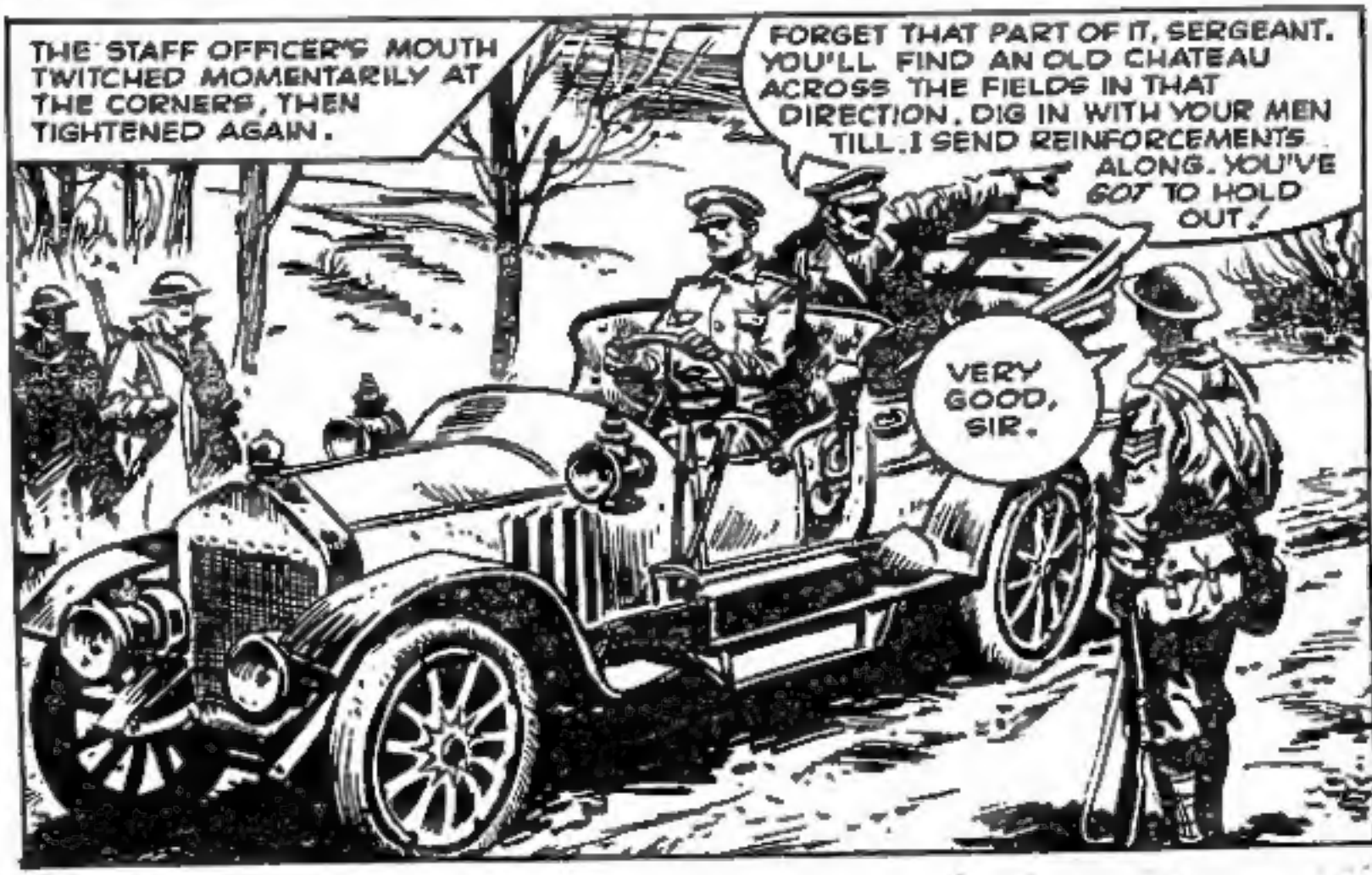
BUT THOMSON WAS WRONG! FOR AN HOUR THEY LAY PINNED BENEATH THE SHRIEKING H.E. BLASTS, CLAMPING DOWN ON THEIR SOUND-LACERATED NERVES, THEIR FACES GRIM AND TAUT.
THERE'S SOMETHING BIG BREWING, SIR. THIS ISN'T THE USUAL JERRY STRAFE. COULD BE A BIG PUSH.
COULD BE, SERGEANT. WE'RE FILTERING OUR MEN THROUGH IN SECTIONS. WAIT HERE WHILE I GO FORWARD AND CHECK UP.

AFTER TWO HOURS, THE BARRAGE LIFTED ABRUPTLY. IN THE STUNNED SILENCE, THEY DRAGGED THEMSELVES UPRIGHT AND SURVEYED THE CARNAGE.
THEY'VE GIVEN US A RIGHT BATTERING, SARGE. NEARLY WIPED US OUT.
ALWAYS LOOKS WORSE THAN IT IS...
WAIT · AND SEE WHAT OUR ONE PIPPER SAYS WHEN HE GETS BACK— IF HE GETS BACK!

SUDDENLY, OUT OF THE MURK OF THAT LATE DECEMBER AFTERNOON, THOMSON SAW THE GUNNERS CHARGING DOWN ON HIM.
HEY, WHAT'S HAPPENED?
JERRY'S BROKEN THROUGH! THE WHOLE SECTOR'S CAVED IN! IT'S SHEER MURDER BACK THERE! WE'RE MOVING BACK TO TRY TO CONSOLIDATE!


THOMSON WAS NO STRANGER TO FEAR BUT HE HAD LEARNED HOW TO BATTEN IT INSIDE HIM. HE ALSO KNEW HOW SUDDEN, OVERWHELMING DISASTER COULD ACT ON MEN AS PANIC SWEEPS THROUGH A HERD OF SHEEP.
HEAR THAT, ARCHIE? JERRY'S BROKEN THROUGH! THEY'LL BE HERE ANY MINUTE! LET'S GET OUT OF HERE!
STAY WHERE YOU ARE, RIDYARD! NOBODY'S RUNNING ANYWHERE! CHECK YOUR RIFLES, MEN. WE STAY HERE TILL WE GET OUR ORDERS!

A STAFF-CAR DREW UP BESIDE THEM AND A GRIM-FACED COLONEL LEANED OUT...
WHO'S IN CHARGE HERE?
I AM, SIR. SERGEANT THOMSON OF THE FIFTH BEAUFORTS, ON OUR WAY TO THE FRONT LINES.


THE STAFF OFFICER'S MOUTH TWITCHED MOMENTARILY AT THE CORNERS, THEN TIGHTENED AGAIN.
FORGET THAT PART OF IT, SERGEANT. YOU'LL FIND AN OLD CHATEAU ACROSS THE FIELDS IN THAT DIRECTION. DIG IN WITH YOUR MEN TILL I SEND REINFORCEMENTS ALONG. YOU'VE GOT TO HOLD OUT!
VERY GOOD, SIR.

AND SO, THOMSON FOUND HIMSELF IN THE RUINED CHATEAU WITH NINE BEWILDERED, RESENTFUL MEN IN THE LINE OF THE ADVANCING GERMAN ARMY. BUT THE HABIT OF DISCIPLINE ENDURED IN HIM.
WHAT DOES THAT JOHNNY RED-TABS EXPECT US TO DO, MATE! TAKE ON THE WHOLE PERISHING GERMAN ARMY?
IF WE HAVE TO-YES! STOP MOANING AND BREW UP. WHEELER-SEDDON - YOU TAKE FIRST WATCH. YOU OTHERS, START BARRICADING THE DOORS AND WINDOWS.

AS NIGHT CLOSED IN THEY LISTENED TO THE DISTANT BOOM OF GUNFIRE.
I RECKON THAT STAFF WALLAH FORGOT ALL ABOUT US, SARGE. THERE'LL BE NO REINFORCEMENTS.
THEN WE'LL MAKE DO WITH WHAT WE'VE GOT. OUR ORDERS ARE TO STAY HERE AND THAT STILL GOES!

AT DAWN NEXT DAY, THOMSON WAS AWAKENED BY ONE OF THE LOOKOUT MEN.

YES, THEY'RE JERRIES ALL RIGHT. LOOKS LIKE THEY'VE GOT OUR LADS ON THE RUN. KEEP YOUR EYES SKINNED. SOONER OR LATER THEY'LL SEND A SQUAD UP HERE WE'VE GOT TO BE READY FOR 'EM.

THEY WERE CAUGHT IN A STEEL TRAP, MAROONED BEHIND THE ADVANCE COLUMNS OF THE GERMAN ARMY. THOMSON WAITED FOR THE INEVITABLE. TOWARDS NOON THAT DAY...

HERE THEY COME, SARGE. FIVE OF 'EM. DO WE OPEN FIRE ?

NOT YET... THEY MAY GO AWAY. HOLD YOUR FIRE TILL I GIVE THE WORD.

LULLED BY THE DECEPTIVE STILLNESS OF THE CHATEAU, THE GERMANS MOVED IN CONFIDENTLY. SUDDENLY, THOMSON SNAPPED OUT AN ORDER.

FIRE!

BRITISH TOMMIES! IT'S A TRAP!

ONE OF 'EM GOT AWAY, SARGE! I COULD HAVE SWORN I HIT HIM, TOO!
IF HE ESCAPES, HE'LL RAISE THE ALARM. I'M GOING AFTER HIM! HELP ME MOVE THIS TABLE, FOWLER.

THE SERGEANT HAD ONLY GONE A SHORT DISTANCE FROM THE CHATEAU WHEN HIS QUARRY, A MASSIVE GERMAN, TURNED ON HIM VICIOUSLY LIKE A CORNERED TIGER.
ENGLANDER SCHWEINHUND! YOU KILL MY COMRADES— NOW I KILL YOU!

THE BIG GERMAN HAD THE STRENGTH OF AN OX...

SERGEANT THOMSON KNEW HE WOULD HAVE JUST ONE CHANCE AGAINST HIS STRONGER OPPONENT WHEN THE CHANCE CAME, HE TOOK IT.

BUT THE SERGEANT'S EFFORT HAD BEEN IN VAIN FOR THE EXCHANGE OF FIRE WITH THE GERMAN PATROL HAD ALERTED THE MAIN ENEMY COLUMN.
THE MEN WE SENT UP TO THE CHATEAU HAVE BEEN KILLED, SIR. THE BRITISH MUST BE HOLDING OUT IN THERE.
CLEAN THEM OUT, SERGEANT~AND TAKE NO PRISONERS! WE CAN'T BE BURDENED WITH PASSENGERS AT A TIME LIKE THIS!

SERGEANT HANS SPIEGEL WAS A VETERAN N.C.O. THE FEW BRITISH IN THE CHATEAU SHOULD PRESENT NO GREAT PROBLEM.
WE'LL SOON FLUSH THOSE TOMMIES OUT. FOUR OF YOU GO ROUND TO THE BACK AND FIND A WAY IN. SCHULTZ, CONCENTRATE YOUR FIRE ON THE WINDOWS.

SYSTEMATICALLY, THE MACHINE GUN TRAVERSED THE WINDOWS, RIPPING THROUGH THE FLIMSY BARRICADES, FILLING THE ROOM WITH A HAIL OF VICIOUSLY-REBOUNDING BULLETS.
HOLT AND CHETTLE ARE DEAD, ANDY. TWO OTHERS BADLY WOUNDED.
WE'VE GOT TO SILENCE THAT MACHINE GUN SOMEHOW IF WE CAN CONCENTRATE OUR FIRE ON IT FROM AN UPSTAIRS ROOM...

THE SOUND OF TRAMPLING FEET WHIRLED THOMSON ROUND.
LOOK OUT! THEY'RE BREAKING IN! CUT 'EM DOWN!

THEN THEY WERE FIGHTING A GRIM BATTLE AT CLOSE QUARTERS, WITH NO MERCY OFFERED OR TAKEN. THREE TRAPPED MEN FIGHTING LIKE CORNERED WOLVES. THEY WERE UNCONQUERABLE.

BUT AFTERWARDS, THE BRITISH SERGEANT LOOKED AROUND HIM AND FOUGHT DOWN HIS DESPAIR.
WE CAN'T HOLD OUT MUCH LONGER, SARGE ONE RUSH AND IT'LL ALL BE OVER.
WE'RE HERE TO STAY, WHEELER! YOU WATCH THAT DOOR WHILE WE COVER THE WINDOWS.

IN THE FAILING LIGHT OF THE WINTER DUSK, SPIEGEL'S GRIM FACE REFLECTED A GRUDGING APPRECIATION.
THAT PLACE MUST BE A SHAMBLES INSIDE, SERGEANT.
THOSE TOMMIES ARE BRAVE MEN— EVEN IF THEY ARE FIGHTING A LOST CAUSE.

THEN SPIEGEL LOWERED THE MASK OF THE FIGHTING-MAN TO REVEAL THE HONOUR AND INTEGRITY WHICH LAY BENEATH.
SOON IT WILL BE DARK, SERGEANT OUR MEN COULD RUSH THEM.
AND TOMORROW WILL BE CHRISTMAS DAY, ERNST IF WE RUSH THEM, MORE OF OUR MEN WILL DIE...
NO, TOMORROW I'LL OFFER THEM A CHANCE OF HONOURABLE SURRENDER. THEY HAVE EARNED THE RIGHT TO LIVE.

IT WAS CHRISTMAS DAY. THROUGH THE FLURRIES OF SNOW, THOMSON WATCHED THE TALL FIGURE OF SERGEANT SPIEGEL STANDING BEFORE THE CHATEAU.
YOU CAN'T ESCAPE. I OFFER YOU A CHANCE TO SURRENDER YOU WILL BE TREATED JUSTLY AND HONOURABLY.
SORRY- BUT WE FIGHT ON - AND WE'LL ENJOY CHRISTMAS DAY. WE FOUND CHAMPAGNE IN THE CELLARS. HERE, HAVE A DRINK WITH US.

I HAVE A BETTER IDEA, TOMMY. YOU ARE BRAVE MEN. WHY DON'T WE CALL A TRUCE FOR ONE HOUR AND SHARE OUR CHRISTMAS MEAL? FOR ONE HOUR, WE CAN FORGET WE ARE AT WAR.
SUITS ME - BUT I CAN ONLY SPARE THREE OF MY MEN. THE OTHERS WILL BE TOO BUSY!

AN IRONICAL SMILE FLICKERED ACROSS THE LIPS OF THE GERMAN N.C.O. HE KNEW THAT THOMSON WAS MAKING A VALIANT BLUFF—AND RESPECTED HIM FOR IT.
HIMMEL! ONLY FOUR OF THEM—AND ONE IS WOUNDED! AND THEY HELD US OFF!
JA, ROTH. TODAY WE ARE EATING WITH MEN!

THERE, IN THE MIDST OF BATTLE, THE ENEMIES MET TO CELEBRATE THE MAGIC OF CHRISTMAS DAY.
I WOULD HAVE LIKED TO MEET YOU IN HAPPIER CIRCUMSTANCES, SERGEANT. PERHAPS WHEN THIS WAR IS OVER...
YOU NEVER KNOW, SPIEGEL.

THE BRIEF TRUCE WAS OVER.
TIME'S UP, HANS. THANKS FOR THE PARTY.
AUF WIEDERSEHEN, TOMMY. IT HAS BEEN A PRIVILEGE TO MEET YOU AND YOUR MEN.
THE GRIM BUSINESS OF WAR MUST BEGIN AGAIN SPIEGEL TURNED TO HIS MESSENGER WITH A SIGH.
REPORT BACK TO UNTER-OFFIZIER WEBER IN THE VILLAGE. TELL HIM WE ARE MEETING WITH STUBBORN RESISTANCE. WE NEED A FIELD-CANNON AND CREW!
SERGEANT THOMSON, I MAKE YOU A FINAL OFFER OF HONOURABLE SURRENDER BEFORE WE FIRE. BE SENSIBLE, THERE IS NO DISGRACE IN ACCEPTING DEFEAT.
NO SURRENDER, SPIEGEL! THAT'S MY LAST WORD!

SPIEGEL RAPPED OUT AN ORDER AND THE CANNON STARTED TO PUMP IN H.E. SHELLS AT POINT-BLANK RANGE.

IT WAS OVER. THE GERMAN N.C.O. LOOKED DOWN ON THE MAN HE HAD SLAIN IN THE LINE OF DUTY, THE MAN WHOSE CODE WAS AS STERN AND UNYIELDING AS HIS OWN.

BEFORE HE MOVED ON INTO THE FIERY CRUCIBLE OF BATTLE, SERGEANT SPIEGEL HAD ONE LAST DUTY TO PERFORM IN THE VILLAGE OF L'EGLISE.
TEN BRITISH SOLDIERS HAVE JUST DIED IN THE CHATEAU D'ALBIAC, FATHER. THEY WERE BRAVE MEN. WILL YOU ARRANGE FOR THEM TO BE BURIED DECENTLY?
THEY WILL NOT BE FORGOTTEN, MY SON.

THE SWIRLING SNOW SETTLED THROUGH THE SHATTERED ROOF OF THE CHATEAU D'ALBIAC ONTO THE BODIES OF SERGEANT THOMSON AND HIS FIGHTING MEN. THEIR TASK WAS OVER. THEY HAD FOUGHT THEIR LAST BATTLE.

NOW, TWENTY-ONE YEARS, LATER, HANS SPIEGEL HEADED HIS CAR BACK TOWARDS THE GERMAN FRONTIER AND HOME.
WHAT DO I GO BACK TO? MY COUNTRY TAKEN OVER BY THIEVES AND BRAGGARTS, MEN WITHOUT HONOUR! MURDERERS WHOSE BADGE IS A CROOKED CROSS!

Chapter 2. The Lightning War

SPIEGEL SNORTED IN DISGUST.
NEVER UNDERESTIMATE THE BRITISH, MY SON. THEY ARE FIGHTERS. I FANCY THEY'LL PROVE A MATCH FOR THAT POSTURING LITTLE APE WITH HIS COMIC MOUSTACHE! HE'S NOT A SOLDIER— HE'S A MUSIC-HALL ACT!
Der Führer
FATHER! FOR PITY'S SAKE! WHAT ARE YOU SAYING? YOU'LL LAND US BOTH IN A CONCENTRATION CAMP!

HELMUT SPIEGEL WAS A DEVOUT NAZI, A MAN REARED FROM BOYHOOD IN THE TWISTED FAITH OF ADOLF HITLER. HIS FATHER WATCHED HIM WITH PITY AND DISMAY.
HE IS OUR FUEHRER, THE BUILDER OF THE THIRD REICH! THROUGH HIM OUR FATHERLAND WILL ACHIEVE GREATNESS AGAIN!
HEIL HITLER!
ALL RIGHT, MY SON. I'LL PUT A CURB ON MY FOOLISH TONGUE. LET'S GO HOME NOW—THIS PLACE TURNS MY STOMACH!

LISTEN, HELMUT. HITLER IS A DISEASE—AND HE HAS INFECTED YOU ALL. THAT MAN WILL DESTROY GERMANY AND DRAG US ALL DOWN WITH HIM. MARK MY WORD—GERMANY WILL PAY A TERRIBLE PRICE FOR PUTTING HERSELF IN THAT MONSTER'S HANDS. NOW I WILL SAY NO MORE.

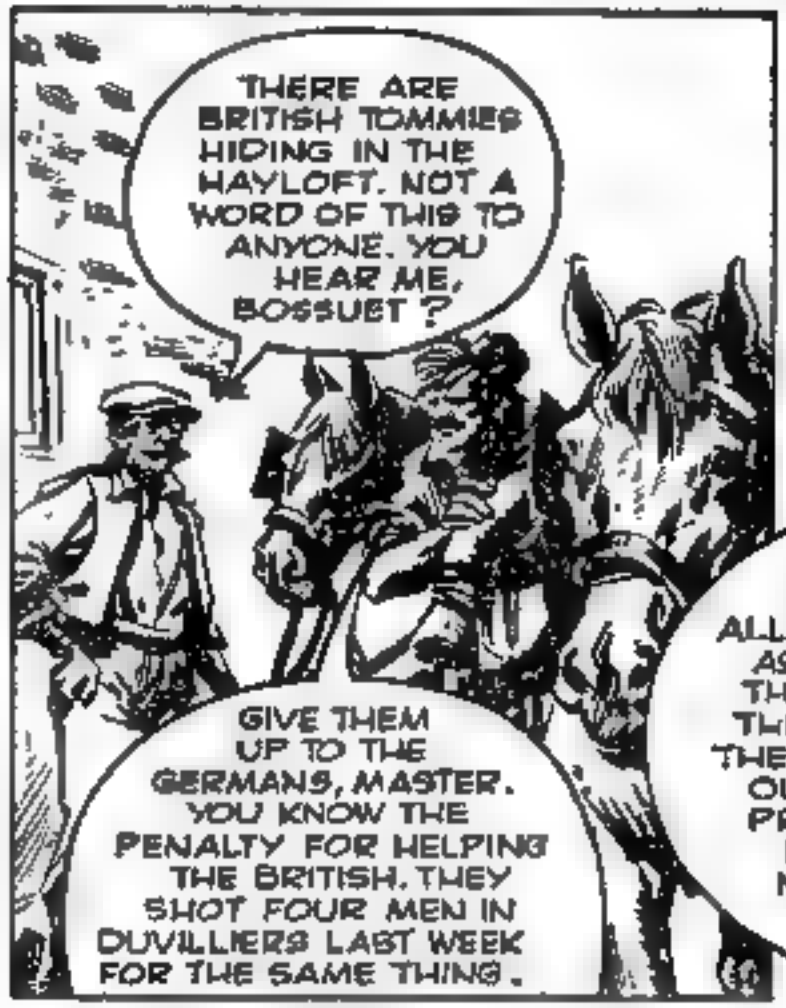
AND NOW IT WAS SPRING, 1940. HITLER'S GENERALS HAD STRUCK, DRIVING THEIR PANZERS THROUGH SEDAN TO OUTFLANK THE MAGINOT LINE THEN FANNING OUT IN STEEL-BARBED PRONGS TO ENCIRCLE THE BRITISH EXPEDITIONARY FORCE ON THE OLD BATTLEGROUND OF NORTHERN FLANDERS.
WE FACE THE MOMENT OF TRUTH, GENTLEMEN. WE HAVE CAUGHT THE BRITISH IN OUR NET. IN THREE DAYS, THE BRITISH ARMY WILL NO LONGER EXIST! HEIL HITLER!
HEIL HITLER!

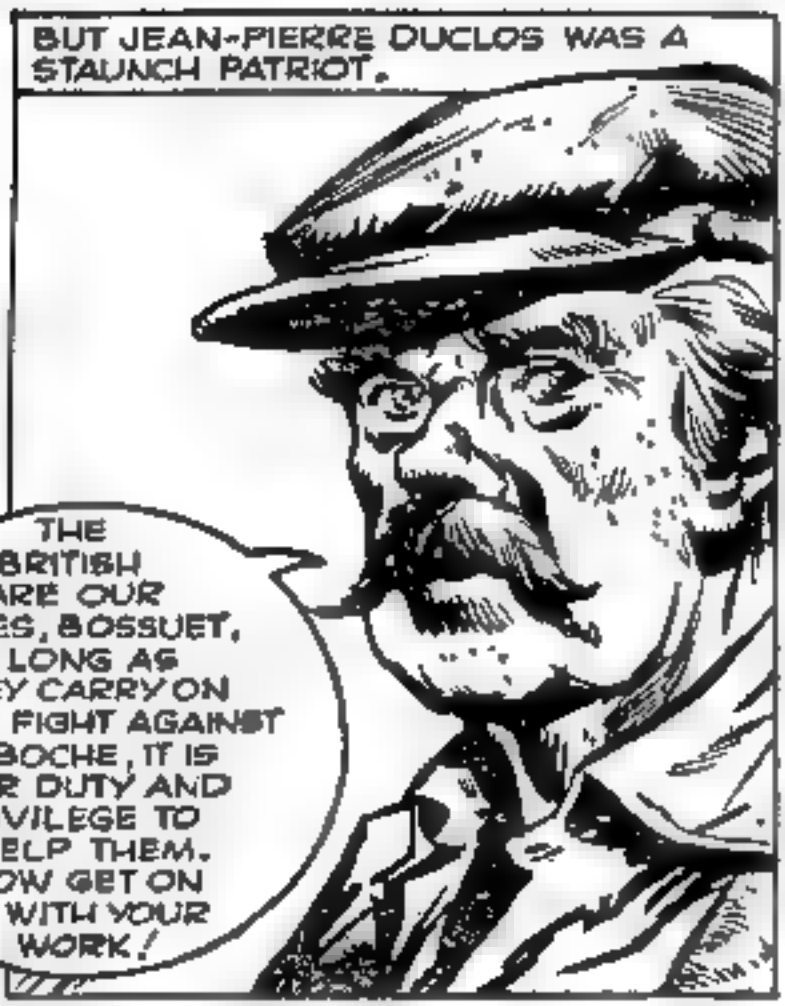
TO THE FANATICAL YOUNG SUPERMEN OF THE THIRD REICH IT WAS ALSO THEIR SUPREME DAY OF ACHIEVEMENT. HELMUT SPIEGEL'S PANZER COLUMN TRUNDLED THROUGH THE STREET OF A FRENCH VILLAGE.
FIRST PARIS, THEN THE ATLANTIC PORTS—AND EUROPE WILL BE IN OUR GRIP. BRITAIN IS AS GOOD AS OUT OF THE WAR. ALL THIS OUR FUEHRER HAS ACCOMPLISHED IN A FEW SHORT WEEKS.
IT IS UNBELIEVABLE! EVERYTHING HE PREDICTED HAS COME TRUE.

A SMALL BRITISH RECONNAISSANCE UNIT HAD BEEN TRAPPED BY THE WHIRLWIND ADVANCE OF THE GERMAN PANZERS AND CUT OFF FROM THEIR MAIN UNIT.
THEY'RE ALL ROUND US, CORP. WHAT DO WE DO NOW?
WE'LL HIDE UP SOMEWHERE TILL NIGHTFALL, THEN TRY TO GET BACK.

CORPORAL DON LARRATT WAS NEW TO BATTLE, UNTRIED AND UNPROVED BUT ALREADY HE HAD THE GIFTS OF LEADERSHIP AND RESOURCE.
ONE OF THOSE FARM-BUILDINGS IS OUR BEST BET. WE'LL HIDE THERE TILL DARK. AND DON'T KICK UP A NOISE. THERE MAY BE A WATCH-DOG PROWLING ROUND.

AS THEY HID IN THE HAY-LOFT, LARRATT HEARD SOMEONE ENTER THE BARN. THEN A VOICE RANG OUT CHEERFULLY.
IT IS ALL RIGHT, MES AMIS. I SAW YOU COME IN. YOU ARE WELCOME TO SHELTER BUT IT IS DANGEROUS FOR US, YOU UNDERSTAND. THE BOCHE IS HARSH WITH FRENCH PATRIOTS WHO HARBOUR BRITISH TOMMIES.
WE UNDERSTAND, M'SIEUR. WE DON'T WANT TO PUT YOU IN DANGER WE INTEND TO LEAVE AT NIGHTFALL.


THERE ARE BRITISH TOMMIES HIDING IN THE HAYLOFT. NOT A WORD OF THIS TO ANYONE. YOU HEAR ME, BOSSUET?
GIVE THEM UP TO THE GERMANS, MASTER. YOU KNOW THE PENALTY FOR HELPING THE BRITISH. THEY SHOT FOUR MEN IN DUVILLIERS LAST WEEK FOR THE SAME THING.


BUT JEAN-PIERRE DUCLOS WAS A STAUNCH PATRIOT.
THE BRITISH ARE OUR ALLIES, BOSSUET, AS LONG AS THEY CARRY ON THE FIGHT AGAINST THE BOCHE, IT IS OUR DUTY AND PRIVILEGE TO HELP THEM. NOW GET ON WITH YOUR WORK!

THAT AFTERNOON, ONE OF THE GERMAN TANKS PULLED OUT OF THE COLUMN ON THE ROADS DE CLOSE TO THE FARM OF JEAN-PIERRE DUCLOS.
JUST AN ELECTRICAL FAULT, HERR OBERLEUTNANT WE CAN SOON PUT IT RIGHT.
VERY WELL, SPIEGEL. HURRY AND CATCH UP WITH US. WE REST TONIGHT AT VILLEFRANCHE, FIFTEEN KILOMETRES FARTHER ON.

A LITTLE LATER, A CIVILIAN WARILY APPROACHED THE STATIONARY PANZER. THE COWARDLY BOSSUET WAS TAKING NO CHANCES.
WHO IS THAT MAN? WHAT DOES HE WANT? WE ARE READY TO MOVE OFF.
HE SAYS THERE ARE BRITISH TOMMIES HIDING IN A BARN NEAR HERE, HERR LEUTNANT.

SPIEGEL MADE A QUICK DECISION.
THEY MAY BE A BAND OF TRAINED SABOTEURS PLANTED BEHIND US BY THE BRITISH. WE'LL CLEAN THEM UP BEFORE WE MOVE ON.

FROM THE HAY-LOFT, LARRATT WATCHED THE GREAT TANK CLEAVE THROUGH THE HEDGEROW THEN TRUNDLE ACROSS THE CORN LIKE AN ALIEN MONSTER.
YOU THINK THEY'VE RUMBLED US, DON?
HOW COULD THEY- UNLESS SOMEBODY GAVE US AWAY? WE'LL STICK TIGHT AND SEE WHAT HAPPENS.

THE TANK GROUND TO A HALT AND THE GUN SWUNG INTO POSITION TO BEAR ON THE LOFT WHERE THE BRITISHERS WAITED.
WE KNOW YOU ARE IN THERE. I GIVE YOU TEN SECONDS TO SURRENDER BEFORE I FIRE. I START COUNTING NOW. ONE.. TWO... THREE...

IT WAS THE YOUNG CORPORAL'S TESTING TIME. AS WITH SERGEANT ANDY THOMSON, TWENTY-FOUR YEARS AGO, HE FACED THE BITTER CHOICE BETWEEN SURRENDER AND A HOPELESS LOSING FIGHT.
.. FIVE... SIX... SEVEN...
THE JIG'S UP, CORPORAL. WE'VE NO OPTION.
WAIT, MIKE. THEY MAY BE BLUFFING. AND SOMETHING TELLS ME THOSE KRAUTS WON'T BE TAKING PRISONERS!

SPIEGEL WAS NOT BLUFFING. THERE WAS A PAUSE AND THEN THE 75 MM GUN BOOMED ONCE AND THE WALLS OF THE BARN LEAPED APART IN FLAME. LARRATT FELT HIMSELF HURLED ASIDE LIKE A RAG DOLL.
ARE YOU ALL RIGHT, LADS?
YES - BUT ONLY JUST! ONE MORE LIKE THAT AND IT'S CURTAINS FOR US! LET'S WALK OUT AND SURRENDER - WHILE WE CAN!

THROUGH THE SMOKE, LARRATT SAW THE HATCH OF THE TANK-TURRET STARTING TO OPEN. INSTINCTIVELY, HE RIPPED A GRENADE FROM HIS BELT, DREW THE PIN AND HURLED IT...

IT WAS A LUCKY THROW. THE GRENADE DROPPED FULL INSIDE THE OPEN TURRET. THERE WAS A MUFFLED ROAR AND A SHOUT OF ALARM AND THEN THE TANK BURST INTO FLAME-
BULLSEYE! YOU GOT 'EM, DON!
C'MON! LET'S GET OUT OF HERE WHILE WE CAN.
LARRATT STOPPED UNCERTAINLY AS HE SAW THE TANK-COMMANDER LEAP TO THE GROUND, HIS CLOTHES LICKING WITH FLAMES.
LEAVE HIM, MATE! HE'S A JERRY, ISN'T HE? HE JUST TRIED TO SMASH US UP, REMEMBER?
I CAN'T LEAVE HIM— EVEN IF HE IS A JERRY! YOU CARRY ON, MIKE. I'LL CATCH UP WITH YOU.

SO IT WAS LARRATT BEAT OUT THE FLAMES WITH HIS BARE HANDS.
YOU ALL RIGHT, FRITZ? NO HARD FEELINGS. IT WAS EITHER YOU OR US— AND WE HAD THE LUCK.
WHAT HAPPENED? I STILL DO NOT KNOW, ERNST-CONRAD— I HEARD THEM...

LARRATT TURNED AND SAW A MOB OF FRENCH PEASANTS RUNNING TOWARDS HIM. THERE WAS AN OMINOUS, FRIGHTENING SNARL IN THEIR VOICES...
ACCURSED BOCHE! LEAVE HIM TO US, TOMMY!
HEY! WHAT'S THE IDEA?
WE KNOW HOW TO DEAL WITH SUCH VERMIN!

KEEP YOUR HANDS OFF HIM. THIS MAN IS A PRISONER OF WAR!
LISTEN, M'SIEUR. YOU DO NOT UNDERSTAND. HIS KIND SLAUGHTERED FIFTEEN OF OUR COUNTRYMEN IN THE VILLAGE YESTERDAY. WE HAVE A SCORE TO SETTLE!
INFLAMED WITH ANGER, ONE OF THE VILLAGERS LUNGED AT SPIEGEL WITH HIS PITCHFORK LARRATT KICKED IT ASIDE, THEN THREW A PUNCH...
THIS MAN IS A TRAITOR! HE FIGHTS TO SAVE THIS GERMAN OFFAL! KILL HIM, TOO! WHO IS NOT WITH US IS AGAINST US! KILL!

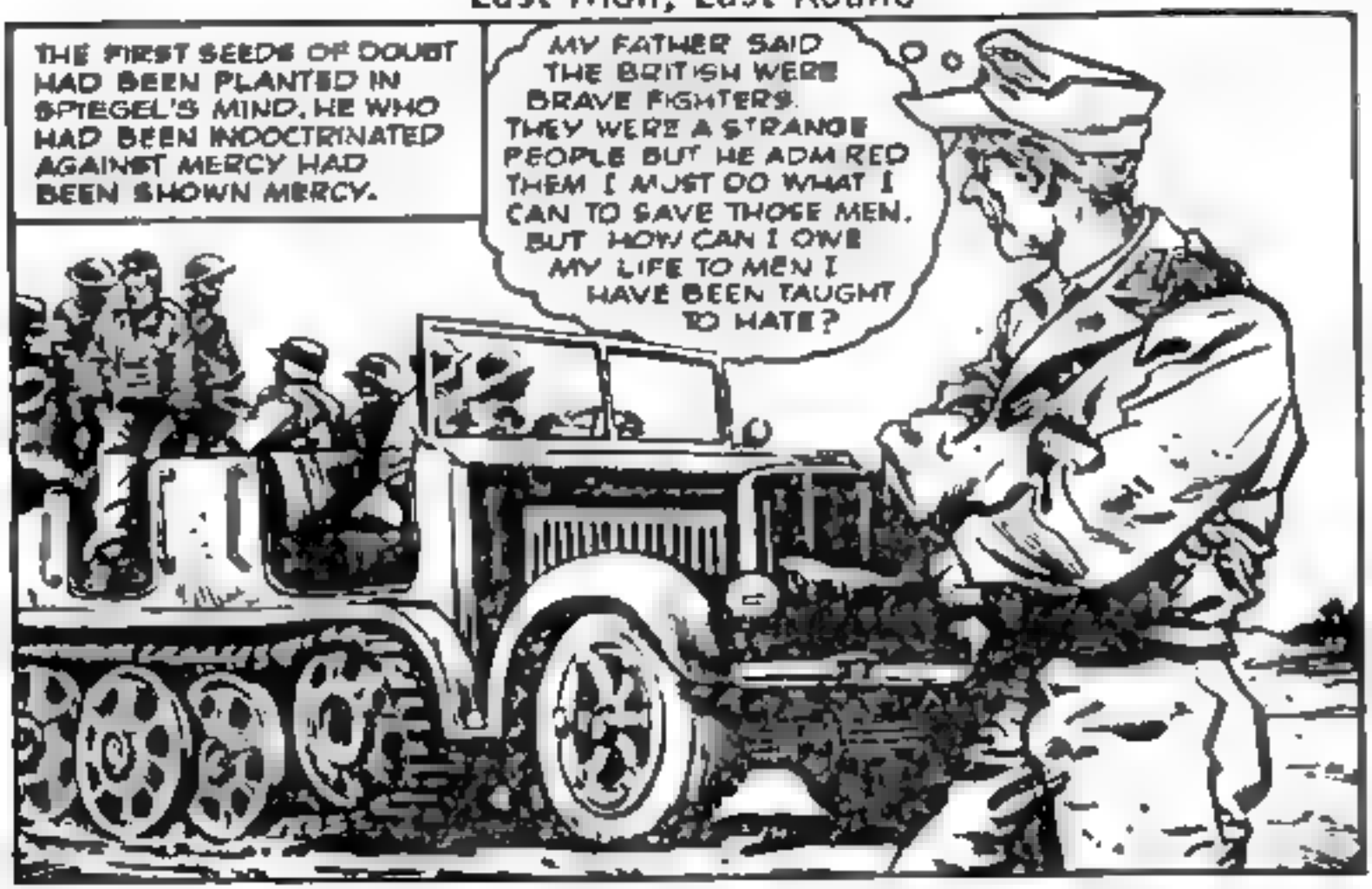
SUDDENLY, ONE OF THEM TURNED AND SCREAMED A WARNING . . .
EN GARDE, MES AMIS! THE S.S. TROOPS! EVERY MAN FOR HIMSELF!

THE TWO OTHER ENGLISH SOLDIERS HAD BEEN CAPTURED BY THE DREADED S.S. TROOPERS, THE BLACK-CLAD KILLERS OF NAZI GERMANY.
TAKE THESE MEN AWAY! HAVE THEM SHOT!
NO, HERR HAUPTMANN! THEY SAVED MY LIFE! THEY PROTECTED ME FROM THE FRENCH!

THE COLD GREEN EYES OF THE S.S. LEADER FLICKERED OVER THE THREE PRISONERS, THEN TOWARDS THE WRECKAGE OF THE BURNING TANK.
AND WHO DESTROYED YOUR PANZER, HERR LEUTNANT, AND KILLED YOUR CREW?
THE BRITISH DID, SIR. IT WAS THEIR DUTY. BUT THAT WAS IN FAIR BATTLE.

SO? AS IT IS OUR DUTY TO KILL OUR ENEMIES. THAT IS THE SIMPLE LOGIC OF WAR, HERR LEUTNANT. LET US HEAR NO MORE OF THIS SENTIMENTAL NONSENSE ABOUT SAVING LIVES. TAKE THEM AWAY, SERGEANT!

SPIEGEL TURNED TO LARRATT, PUZZLED.
I DO NOT UNDERSTAND. I WOULD HAVE KILLED YOU YET YOU FOUGHT FOR MY LIFE AGAINST YOUR OWN ALLIES. WHY?
BECAUSE I HAPPEN TO BE A PRIZE FOOL, JERRY! DON'T TRY TO UNDERSTAND. THEY DON'T TEACH IT IN YOUR SCHOOLS!


THE FIRST SEEDS OF DOUBT HAD BEEN PLANTED IN SPIEGEL'S MIND. HE WHO HAD BEEN INDOCTRINATED AGAINST MERCY HAD BEEN SHOWN MERCY.
MY FATHER SAID THE BRITISH WERE BRAVE FIGHTERS. THEY WERE A STRANGE PEOPLE BUT HE ADMIRED THEM. I MUST DO WHAT I CAN TO SAVE THOSE MEN. BUT HOW CAN I OWE MY LIFE TO MEN I HAVE BEEN TAUGHT TO HATE?

THE THREE PRISONERS WERE LODGED IN A CELL OF THE VILLAGE PRISON, WAITING FOR THE FIRING PARTY.
WE'RE IN A RIGHT PICKLE, MATE. IF YOU HADN'T GONE BACK TO THAT KRAUT WE MIGHT HAVE GOT CLEAR.
SAVE IT, ERNIE. I DID IT BECAUSE I HAD TO. NOW FORGET IT...

IN THE STONE-FLAGGED S.S. HEADQUARTERS ABOVE THEM...
WHAT ARE YOUR PLANS FOR THE THREE PRISONERS, SIR?
THEY ARE SIMPLE. FIRST THEY WILL BE INTERROGATED FOR INFORMATION — THEN SHOT!

THE GREEN EYES OF THE S.S. LEADER GLARED AT SPIEGEL WITH SUSPICION. TO HIM, CRUELTY WAS A SYMBOL OF HIS FAITH IN THE NAZI PARTY...
SURELY THEY HAVE A RIGHT TO BE TREATED AS PRISONERS OF WAR...
LEUTNANT SPIEGEL, WHILE YOU MOUTH TREASON TO ME HERE, YOUR COMRADES ARE IN BATTLE. I WILL ARRANGE FOR TRANSPORT TO TAKE YOU BACK TO YOUR UNIT— AND A REPORT ON YOUR CONDUCT WILL BE SENT BACK TO GESTAPO H.Q.! NOW— GET OUT!

THE THREAT IN THE S.S. CAPTAIN'S WORDS WAS CLEAR ONLY SPIEGEL'S DEATH WOULD SAVE HIM AND HIS FATHER FROM THE AGONY OF THE CONCENTRATION CAMP!
THERE IS ONLY ONE WAY LEFT TO PROVE YOUR LOYALTY TO THE FUEHRER, SPIEGEL. TO DIE BRAVELY IN BATTLE. ONLY THAT WILL SAVE YOU AND YOUR FAMILY FROM DISGRACE. HEIL HITLER!
HEIL HITLER!

HELMUT SPIEGEL WAS TORN BETWEEN TWO LOYALTIES—TO HIS PARTY AND TO HIS OWN BETTER NATURE...
THEY WILL KILL ME AND SEND MY FATHER TO A CONCENTRATION CAMP. WHAT RIGHT HAVE I TO DO THAT TO HIM? THOSE MEN ARE NOTHING TO ME.

BUT BELOW THE THIN VENEER OF NAZI INDOCTRINATION, THE WARM HUMANITY OF HANS SPIEGEL, THE SIMPLE SOLDIER, RAN STRONG AND DEEP IN THE HEART OF HIS SON.
NO, THAT IS NOT TRUE! I MUST HELP THEM AS FAR AS I CAN. MY FATHER WOULD WANT ME TO...

AT THAT MOMENT, ONE OF THE S.S. LEADER'S AIDES APPEARED OUTSIDE THE GUARDROOM.
HEINZ, YOU WILL BRING THE BRITISH CORPORAL TO HAUPTMANN BUCKHORST FOR QUESTIONING IN TEN MINUTES. THEN YOU WILL DETAIL SIX MEN FOR A FIRING-PARTY.
JAWOHL, HERR LEUTNANT.

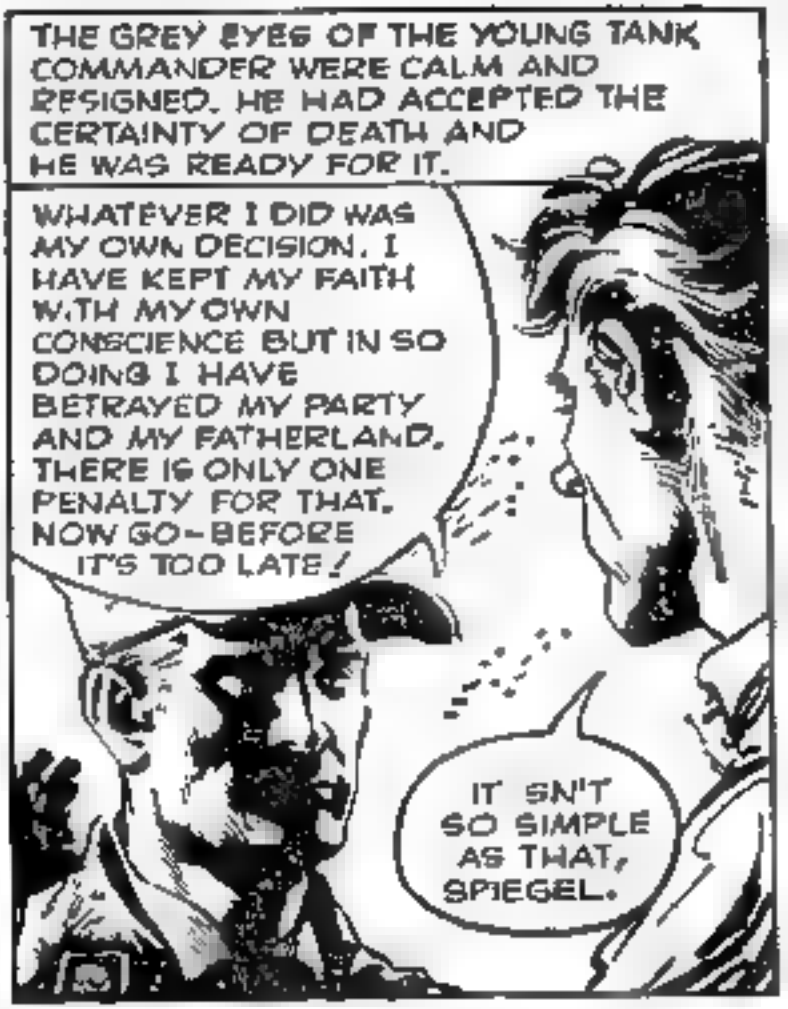
SPIEGEL HAD MADE HIS DECISION AND NOW HE HAD TO ACT SWIFTLY...
LISTEN CAREFULLY, ENGLANDER THERE IS VERY LITTLE TIME LEFT. SOON THEY WILL BE TAKING YOU FOR INTERROGATION, THEN THE THREE OF YOU ARE TO BE SHOT. I'M GOING TO TRY TO HELP YOU ESCAPE.

YOU MUST KNOW WHAT LL HAPPEN TO YOU WHEN THEY FIND OUT WHAT YOU'RE DOING. WHY ARE YOU DOING THIS FOR US, SPIEGEL ?
WHY DID YOU SAVE MY LIFE THIS AFTERNOON? ANSWER THAT ONE, TOMMY, AND I'LL ANSWER YOURS!

TEN MINUTES LATER, WHEN THE BIG S.S. SERGEANT CAME FOR LARRATT, HELMUT SPIEGEL STRUCK SILENTLY.

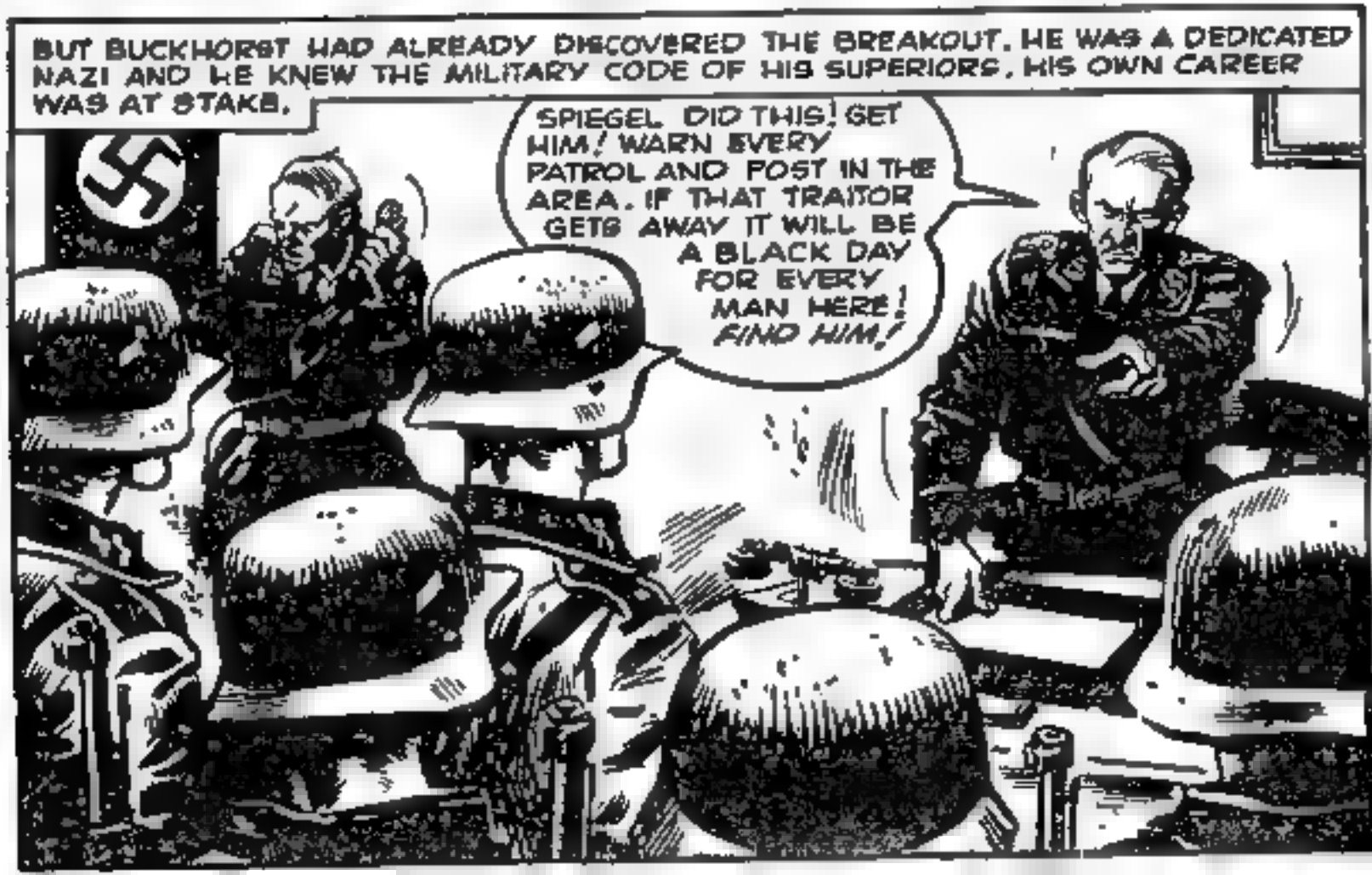
Last Man, Last Round

THEN THE GERMAN AND THE BRITISH PRISONERS PADDED ALONG THE PASSAGE PAST THE UNCONSCIOUS GUARD AND OUT INTO THE STREET.
TAKE THAT STAFF CAR AND GET AWAY STICK TO THE SIDE ROADS AS MUCH AS YOU CAN GOOD LUCK, ENGLANDER.
JUST A MINUTE, PAL. WHAT HAPPENS TO YOU? WE CAN'T LEAVE YOU TO CARRY THE CAN FOR US!

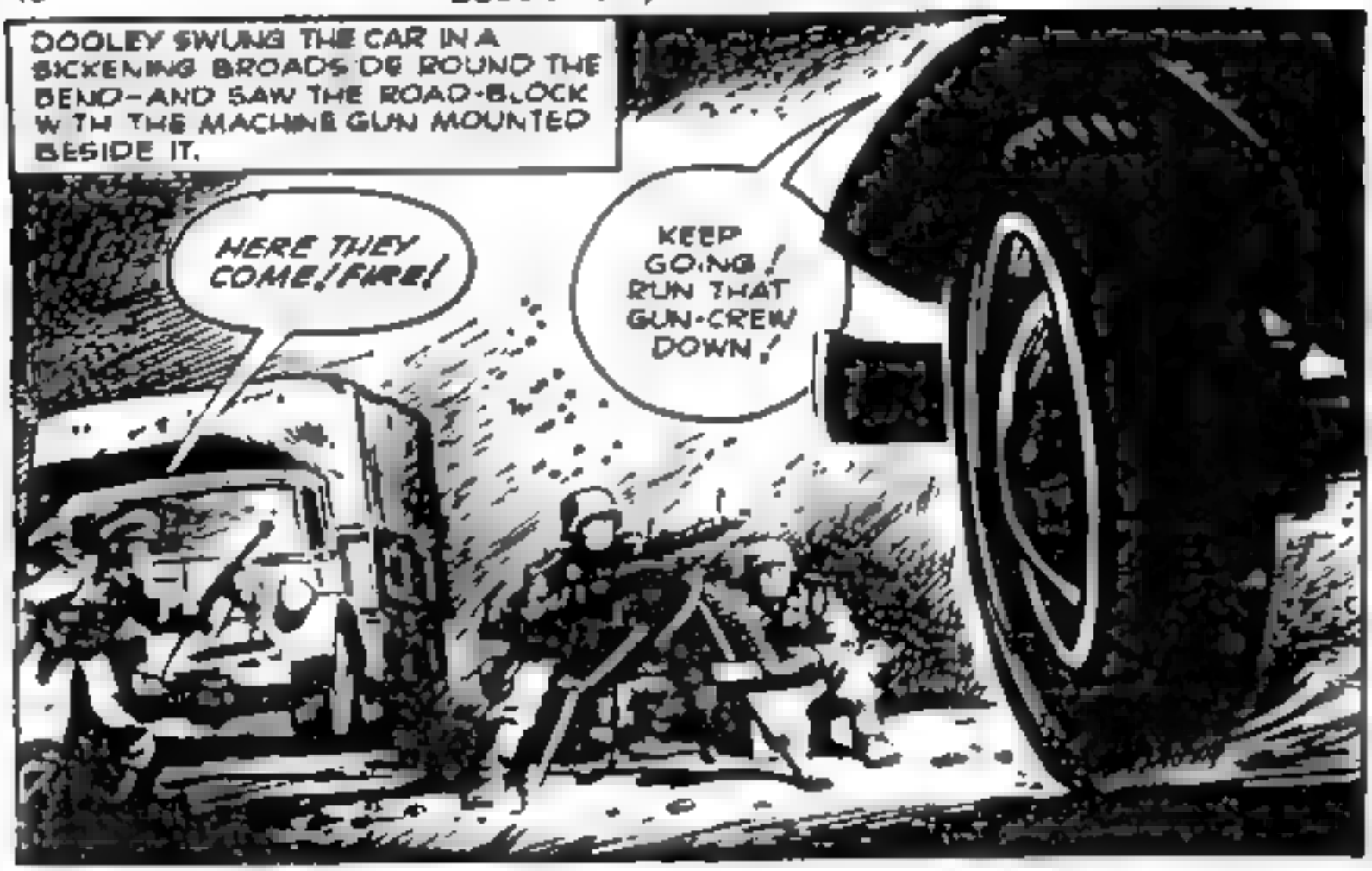

THE GREY EYES OF THE YOUNG TANK COMMANDER WERE CALM AND RESIGNED. HE HAD ACCEPTED THE CERTAINTY OF DEATH AND HE WAS READY FOR IT.
WHATEVER I DID WAS MY OWN DECISION. I HAVE KEPT MY FAITH W.TH MY OWN CONSCIENCE BUT IN SO DOING I HAVE BETRAYED MY PARTY AND MY FATHERLAND. THERE IS ONLY ONE PENALTY FOR THAT. NOW GO-BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE!
IT SN'T SO SIMPLE AS THAT, SPIEGEL.

LARRATT HAD MADE HIS OWN DECISION, TOO!
NO HARD FEELINGS, JERRY! BUT YOU GIVE ME NO OPTION!

THE GERMAN SPUN ROUND AND FELL LIKE A LOG—INTO LARRATT'S WAITING HANDS.
WHAT'S THE IDEA?
WE'RE TAKING HIM WITH US. WE OWE THAT TO HIM. HE'LL BE BETTER OFF AS A BRITISH P.O.W. THAN BACK THERE WITH THOSE BLACK MURDERERS! GET GOING!


BUT BUCKHORST HAD ALREADY DISCOVERED THE BREAKOUT. HE WAS A DEDICATED NAZI AND HE KNEW THE MILITARY CODE OF HIS SUPERIORS. HIS OWN CAREER WAS AT STAKE.
SPIEGEL DID THIS! GET HIM! WARN EVERY PATROL AND POST IN THE AREA. IF THAT TRAITOR GETS AWAY IT WILL BE A BLACK DAY FOR EVERY MAN HERE! FIND HIM!

Chapter 3. Honour The Brave


DOOLEY SWUNG THE CAR IN A SICKENING BROADSIDE ROUND THE BEND—AND SAW THE ROAD-BLOCK WITH THE MACHINE GUN MOUNTED BESIDE IT.
HERE THEY COME! FIRE!
KEEP GOING! RUN THAT GUN-CREW DOWN!

THERE WAS A CRASH OF RENDING METAL, A YELL OF AGONY...

..AND THEY WERE THROUGH! THE CAR SWERVED ACROSS THE ROAD, STRAIGHTENED UP AND ROARED ON! HANS SPIEGEL OPENED HIS EYES TO SEE LARRATT'S TAUT FACE BESIDE HIM ..
WHAT HAPPENED? WHY DID YOU TAKE ME WITH YOU?
YOU'RE ON YOUR WAY TO BLIGHTY, MATE. WE JUST BROKE THROUGH A ROAD-BLOCK SORRY I HAD TO BUST YOU ON THE JAW- BUT IT WAS THE ONLY WAY OUT.

SPIEGEL GRITTED HIS TEETH IN THE DARKNESS! THE SUDDEN CONSUMING PAIN IN HIS CHEST WHERE THE SCHMEISSER BULLET HAD FOUND HIM, WARNED HIM THAT HIS COURSE WAS RUN.
I'VE DONE MY PART, TOMMY. STOP SOMEWHERE AND PUT ME DOWN. I CAN LOOK AFTER MYSELF.
A BARGAIN'S A BARGAIN, JERRY! IF WE GET THROUGH, WE TAKE YOU WITH US. YOU CAN SIT OUT THE WAR IN COMFORT IN ENGLAND.

THROUGH THE WAVES OF WEAKNESS THAT SHOOK HIS BODY, SPIEGEL HEARD LARRATT'S VOICE RAISED IN SUDDEN ALARM
HOLD IT, MICK! THERE'S AN ARMOURED CAR AHEAD! WE CAN'T GET PAST THAT! PULL UP AND REVERSE- AND DOWSE THE HEADLIGHTS!

BUT EVEN AS THE CAR SLID TO A HALT, LARRATT SAW THE REFLECTED LIGHTS OF THE VEHICLE BEHIND THEM. THEY WERE TRAPPED!
SPIEGEL! THIS WAY! THEY'LL GET YOU, SPIEGEL!
GOOD LUCK, TOMMY! I'D RATHER DIE AMONG MY OWN KIND.

ONLY LARRATT SUSPECTED WHAT WAS GOING ON IN THE WOUNDED GERMAN'S MIND.
WHAT'S HE UP TO? HAS HE GONE CRAZY?
NO, DON. I THINK SPIEGEL'S FOUND HIS OWN WAY OUT. AND I'M NOT SO SURE HE ISN'T RIGHT!

THROUGH EYES GLAZING WITH THE ONSET OF DEATH, SPIEGEL SAW THE ARMOURED CAR LOOM UP THROUGH THE WINDSCREEN.

THEY'RE TRYING TO CRASH US! SHOOT, MAN! HEAD THEM OFF!

BUT SPIEGEL'S BATTLE WAS NOT WITH THE MEN OF HIS FATHERLAND. AT THE LAST MOMENT HE WRENCHED THE WHEEL ROUND WITH AN EFFORT THAT TORE A GASP OF PAIN FROM HIS LIPS.

YOU WILL UNDERSTAND, FATHER. THE SLATE IS CLEAN!

THE STAFF CAR CRASHED THROUGH THE BRIDGE PARAPET, SEEMED TO HOVER FOR A MOMENT, THEN STARTED TO DROP TO THE RIVER BELOW. BUT THE MAN AT THE WHEEL WAS ALREADY DEAD!

AS THE PURSUIT CAR BRAKED, BUCKHORST LEAPED OUT AND STUDIED THE WATERS BELOW.
ANY SURVIVORS?
NONE, SIR. IT WENT DOWN LIKE A STONE. THE WATER IS THIRTY FEET DEEP HERE.

WITH THE DEATH OF SPIEGEL, BUCKHORST'S FANATICAL VENGEANCE WAS DIRECTED AT THE LIVING NOW.
SO WE CAN WIPE THE THREE BRITISHERS OFF THE RECORD. THEY ARE UNIMPORTANT BUT SPIEGEL- THE TRAITOR! THAT ISN'T FINISHED! I'LL HAVE HIS FAMILY FOR THIS ROTTENNESS MUST BE BURNED OUT- ROOT, STOCK AND BRANCH!

DAWN FOUND LARRATT AND HIS MEN HOING AT THE EDGE OF A WOOD. THEY WERE FAMISHED AND COMPLETELY LOST
WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE, CORP?
WE'LL LIE LOW TILL DARK. WE MIGHT SCROUNGE GRUB FROM A FARMHOUSE, BUT IT'S TOO RISKY. LET'S GET BACK INTO THE WOOD BEFORE A JERRY PATROL SHOWS UP.
LARRATT PULLED UP SHORT. HE HAD HEARD THE FAINT METALLIC CLICK OF A GUN. A VOICE RASPED OUT HARSHLY.
STAY WHERE YOU ARE!
LOOKS LIKE WE'VE COPPED IT THIS TIME, LADS. THEY MUST HAVE BEEN WAITING FOR US.

THEN LARRATT GAVE A GASP OF RELIEF. THE AMBUSHERS WERE FRENCHMEN. BUT IT WAS SHORT-LIVED ...
WHERE ARE YOUR PAPERS? - ARMAND-MICHAEL-SEARCH THESE MEN FOR WEAPONS.
YOU'VE GOT US ALL WRONG, MATE. WE ARE BRITISH SOLDIERS. OUR PAPERS WERE TAKEN AWAY WHEN A BUNCH OF S.S. MEN CAUGHT US YESTERDAY.

THEY WERE IN A TIGHT CORNER.
LIAR! YOU ARE GERMANS DROPPED HERE IN BRITISH UNIFORM TO SPREAD CONFUSION. WE SHOT FOUR LIKE YOU IN VERVERS TWO DAYS AGO. WE ARE TAKING YOU TO MADAME CLODY FOR QUESTIONING. SHE WILL DECIDE IF YOU LIVE OR DIE!

THE THREE BRITISHERS WERE LED ACROSS THE FIELDS TO A LONELY FARMHOUSE WHERE THEY WERE CONFRONTED BY A LITTLE OLD WOMAN WITH SHREWD EYES. A WOMAN WITH A CULTURED ENGLISH VOICE!
I AM GOING TO ASK YOU TWO QUESTIONS. HERE IS THE FIRST ONE. "LITTLE MISS MUFFET SAT ON A TUFFET EATING HER CURDS AND WHEY...' NOW WHAT ARE THE NEXT LINES? QUICKLY!
THAT'S EASY. 'THERE CAME A BIG SPIDER WHO SAT DOWN BESIDE HER AND FRIGHTENED MISS MUFFET AWAY.'

THE OLD WOMAN NODDED, THEN WENT ON BEFORE LARRATT COULD RECOVER FROM HIS ASTONISHMENT.
GOOD! NOW IF THE SPURS MET THE PENSIONERS ON THE GUNNERS' GROUND - WHAT WOULD BE HAPPENING?
YOU MEAN... IF TOTTENHAM MET CHELSEA ON THE ARSENAL GROUND? IT WOULD BE A FOOTBALL MATCH, OF COURSE. PROBABLY A CUP-TIE REPLAY.

IT WAS A TEST CLEVERLY DEVISED TO FIND THE FLAWS OF A WOULD-BE GERMAN SPY WHO KNEW HIS ENGLISH - BUT DID NOT KNOW ENGLAND!
HAVE NO FEAR, PIERRE. THESE MEN ARE BRITISH. THERE IS NO DOUBT OF THAT!
AH, M'SIEURS. YOU UNDERSTAND - WE COULD TAKE NO CHANCES NOW WE WILL GET YOU A MEAL THEN TAKE YOU BACK TO JOIN YOUR COUNTRYMEN.

BEFORE THEY LEFT, LARRATT HAD A WORD WITH THE LITTLE ENGLISHWOMAN.
BUT YOU ARE ENGLISH, MA'AM. WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE IN FRANCE?
THAT IS A LONG STORY. I WAS A SCHOOL TEACHER IN LONDON MANY YEARS AGO. I CAME TO FRANCE ON HOLIDAY, MET ANDRE CLODY AND MARRIED HIM. HE DIED TWO YEARS AGO BUT THIS IS MY HOME. GOOD LUCK, MY BOY. WE MAY MEET AGAIN IN HAPPIER TIMES.

THE FRENCH GUIDES LED THEM A TORTUOUS JOURNEY ACROSS THE FLANDERS COUNTRYSIDE. TWICE THEY NARROWLY ESCAPED DETECTION BY ADVANCE GERMAN PATROLS. THEN, FINALLY, PIERRE STOPPED...
THERE IS ONE OF YOUR BRITISH COLUMNS MOVING TO THE COAST, MON VIEUX. BONNE CHANCE!
THANKS, PIERRE. MAYBE THE BOCHE HAS US ON THE RUN NOW— BUT WE'LL BE BACK. YOU CAN COUNT ON THAT!

SO LARRATT JOINED THE COLUMN IN ITS FIGHTING RETREAT TOWARDS THE CHANNEL. NO MAN KNEW WHAT AWAITED HIM IN THE LONG STRUGGLE AHEAD. THE MARTYRDOM OF FRANCE WAS ALMOST ACCOMPLISHED. BRITAIN STOOD ALONE!

MEANWHILE, BUCKHORST'S REPORT ON HELMUT SPIEGEL HAD GONE BACK TO BERLIN AND FROM THERE TO MUNICH. THAT NIGHT, A CAR SLID TO A HALT OUTSIDE HANS SPIEGEL'S HOME.
GET DRESSED, SPIEGEL. YOU ARE UNDER ARREST YOUR SON IS A TRAITOR TO THE THIRD REICH!
MY SON— A TRAITOR! I WILL NOT BELIEVE THAT!

WHEN THE OLD MAN WAS TOLD HOW HIS SON HAD DIED, HE SMILED SADLY...
I SEE. SO HE HAS BETRAYED YOUR BELOVED PARTY. BUT HE HAS NOT BETRAYED GERMANY—AND THAT IS WHAT MATTERS MOST. I AM READY TO GO...
YOU FILTHY SWINE! LIKE FATHER—LIKE SON. TAKE HIM TO THE CAR!
SPIEGEL WIPED THE BLOOD FROM HIS MOUTH.
THIS IS NOT GERMANY ANY MORE—NOT THE GERMANY WE FOUGHT AND DIED FOR TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO. IT IS A LAND POSSESSED BY THUGS AND RACKETEERS! YOU ARE A PACK OF GUTTER-LOUTS LED BY A MADMAN!

AS THEY REACHED THE STREET, SPIEGEL BROKE AWAY FROM HIS CAPTORS AND STARTED TO RUN. HE WAS NOT RUNNING AWAY FROM FEAR. HE WAS RUNNING TO MEET HIS DEAD SON!
HELMUT, MY SON! YOU WERE YOUNG AND THESE BEASTS FOOLED YOU—AND THEN YOUR EYES WERE OPENED TO THE TRUTH. I UNDERSTAND, MY SON. YOU DIED WITH HONOUR—AS A SOLDIER SHOULD!
DON'T LET HIM GET AWAY! SHOOT!

THE SEARCHING SCHMEISSER SLUGS FOUND HIM. SPIEGEL SANK TO THE GROUND.
DEATH IS NOT IMPORTANT. MANY MORE WILL TRAVEL THIS WAY AFTER ME—BUT SOME DAY, GERMANY WILL BE CLEAN... CLEAN!

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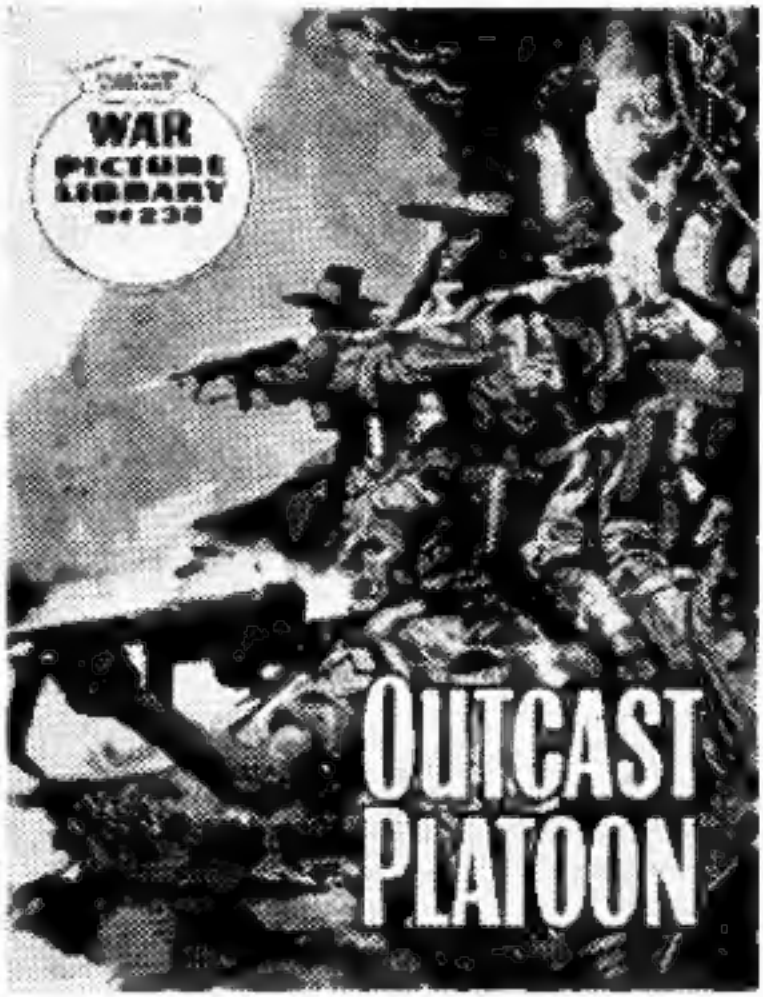

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